

Calgary Jews disavow sex offender, rabbi's letter

Already reeling from assault scandal, community recoils from leader's message noting 'all the good' in convict

BY RENEE GHERT-ZAND | February 15, 2013, 9:03 pm |

In the wake of a sexual abuse scandal that has rocked Calgary, leaders of the Canadian city's Jewish community have moved quickly to distance themselves from a local rabbi's expression of support for a convicted Jewish psychiatrist with a notorious past.

At issue is a [letter](#) from Rabbi Yisroel Miller, the leader of House of Jacob Mikveh Israel, an Orthodox synagogue, which was read aloud during the sentencing hearing for Dr. Aubrey Levin. Levin, who had occupied a prominent position in the University of Calgary's psychiatry department, was convicted Jan. 31 of sexually assaulting male patients who had been referred to him for assessment and treatment by the province of Alberta's criminal justice system.

At the hearing, Levin's attorney characterized the assaults as "minor" and read aloud a letter submitted by Miller, the psychiatrist's rabbi at House of Jacob Mikveh Israel. Miller wrote that Levin's "humble manner and complete lack of arrogance endeared him to everyone," and pleaded for leniency.

"The bad does not erase all the good," Miller argued. "I know all the goodness within him still remains. A prison term would be a death sentence for him."

Justice Donna Shelley was unmoved, sentencing Levin to [five years in prison](#) for "horrible violations of the trust that these the patients put in you as their psychiatrist."

'Rabbi Miller expected his clergy letter . . . to be read privately by the judge, not read aloud in court'

"As a psychiatrist, you knew their vulnerabilities . . . They were entitled to feel safe and supported during their appointments with you. Instead, you exploited them in a predatory and repetitious manner."

The offender's wife, Erica Levin, was not in court. She was under house arrest, having been [charged with attempted jury tampering](#).

Her husband was released on bail Wednesday, pending the outcome of an appeal.

Levin's membership in Calgary's approximately 7,500-person Jewish community was not publicly acknowledged until the rabbi's letter was read, according to Bev Sheckter, executive director of Jewish Family Service Calgary.

"I would have been happy had no one ever known he was Jewish," she told The Times of Israel.

Calgary's Jewish community was further shaken by the revelation of Levin's [highly controversial past](#) in his native South Africa, where he lived before immigrating to Canada in 1995.

In South Africa, Levin had served as the chief psychiatrist in the apartheid-era military, receiving the nickname "Dr. Shock" for his use of [electroconvulsive aversion therapy](#) to "cure" gay soldiers. The psychiatrist, now 74, also reportedly held conscientious objectors against their will at a military hospital and subjected them to powerful drug treatments.

"It was a total shock," said Nelson Halpern, co-president of House of Jacob Mikveh Israel. "Levin arrived in Calgary and joined our shul. We welcomed him as a new member and as a professional with a lovely family. We had no reason to suspect anything like this about him."

Levin had reportedly suppressed discussion of his past once he entered Canada, [allegedly threatening lawsuits](#) against news outlets that discovered his story.

His past also included accusations before South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission that Levin was guilty of "gross human rights abuses," including the chemical castration of gay men.

'I would have been happy had no one ever known he was Jewish'

Levin was a member of the first Jewish family to join the South African National Party, which implemented and enforced apartheid for nearly five decades. He had a history of anti-gay statements and actions.

Halpern, the co-president of Calgary's Orthodox synagogue, is one of several prominent community members to issue public statements emphasizing that Miller's letter speaks only for the rabbi, and not for the community as a whole.

"Rabbi Miller expected his clergy letter of support for the offender to be read privately by the judge, not read aloud in court," Halpern explained to The Times of Israel. "He has every right to be supportive of and show compassion for his congregant. However, he should have chosen other words."

Halpern and Adam Singer, the president of the Calgary Jewish Federation, wrote letters printed in the [Calgary Sun](#) and [Calgary Herald](#), respectively. In Singer's, published Feb. 5, he wrote, "Miller was not speaking on behalf of the Jewish community of Calgary. Calgary Jewish Federation, the representative body of Calgary's Jewish community, condemns sexual abuse, domestic violence and violations of human dignity. The victims of such crimes deserve to see justice done, and those found guilty in a court of law must face the consequences of their actions."

"Federation speaks for the community, not Rabbi Miller," said Sheckter, whose agency runs a program dealing with domestic violence and sexual abuse in the community. "The community would not have been upset if the rabbi had limited his comments to the rabbi-congregant relationship. What has upset us is that it included reference to the community as a whole. None of us would support a sexual predator who has been found guilty by law."

"At Jewish Family Service, we try to protect the vulnerable, so to have this said about our community is very disconcerting," Sheckter said.

Levin's wife was under house arrest, charged with attempted jury tampering

Miller comes from a well-known and respected Boston rabbinic family and is the author of several books on Jewish thought. In Pittsburgh, he led the Modern Orthodox Congregation Poale Zedeck and held a number of leadership roles in the greater Jewish community, including as an officer of the Jewish Family & Children's Service. Halpern said he was not sure

whether Miller, who arrived at House of Jacob Mikveh Israel in July 2009, was aware of the local community's heightened sensitivity around the issue of sexual abuse following a pedophilia case there in the 1990s, when a youth adviser and kashrut supervisor named [David Webber](#) served six years in prison for sexual assault and possession of child pornography.

Despite the community's negative reaction, Miller has not issued a statement since the controversy began. He didn't respond to a request for comment from The Times of Israel.

Halpern said that the board of House of Jacob Mikveh Israel is enacting new policies to prevent a repeat of the controversy.

Sheckter has reached out to the rabbi, whom she called "a very knowledgeable man who has been open in the past to conversations with JFSC about family violence."

"It's really an educational piece. I don't want to blame him," she said. "Maybe he doesn't understand the ramifications that sexual abuse can have on people. I want to work together so that his won't happen again."

"He is a powerful man. People listen to him," Sheckter said of Miller. "If people feel a rabbi is not sensitive to these things, then victims will not come forward to ask him for help."

© 2015 THE TIMES OF ISRAEL, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED